

Memorandum

To: Chairman and Commissioners

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From: Robert I. Remen

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Information**

Ref: RURAL COUNTIES TASK FORCE SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT

For the past thirteen years, the Commission has sponsored the Rural Counties Task Force for the purpose of highlighting rural transportation issues. Celia McAdam, Chair of the Task Force, will provide a briefing on this item regarding the recent activities of the Task Force.

Attachment

RURAL COUNTIES TASK FORCE

Semi-Annual Report

June 2001

The Rural Counties Task Force (RCTF) was formed in 1988 as a joint effort between the California Transportation Commission and the 28 rural county Regional Transportation Planning Agencies (RTPAs) and Local Transportation Commissions (CTCs). The purpose of the Task Force is to provide a direct opportunity for the smallest counties of California to remain informed, have a voice, and help shape statewide transportation policies and programs.

The Task Force is an informal organization with no budget or staff. Meetings are held on the third Friday of odd numbered months at the Caltrans Headquarters facility. Kathie Jacobs of the CTC staff acts as liaison to the Task Force, and CTC and Caltrans staff typically attend these meetings to present information or engage in discussions regarding statewide transportation issues that interest and affect rural counties.

The implementation of SB 45 in 1997 significantly increased the responsibilities on transportation planning agencies. The effects were particularly pronounced in the smallest agencies, where modest staffs were now responsible for project specific planning, programming, and monitoring. These changes also intensified the value and purpose of the Task Force.

The following information is provided to highlight the challenges and accomplishments that have involved Task Force members in the first half of 2001, as well as the issues that will continue to confront Task Force members in the future.

State Only Funding

Task Force members very much appreciate the Commission's policies to provide state-only funds for local road projects of \$750,000 or less, as well as matching funds for the federal dollars in the STIP, including Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) where applicable. Equally appreciated is the Commission's policy to allow rural areas to exchange Transportation Enhancement Activities (TEA) and Regional Surface Transportation Program (RSTP) funds for state-only dollars. These policies have allowed Task Force members to avoid dealing with cumbersome federal processes such as Disadvantaged Business Enterprise requirements or federal environmental regulations on small projects, enabling us to use the funds for product rather than process.

We recognize that state-only funds are a scarce resource that is highly sought after, and that Caltrans must manage the use accordingly. However, the continuation of these Commission policies to exchange federal dollars for rural counties and to provide state-only funds for small projects are of critical importance.

Efforts

Task Force members have been working closely with Caltrans Headquarters staff as they propose revisions to the state-only funding policies, to make sure that the ongoing needs of rural agencies are considered.

Continuing Issues

- Continued availability of state-only funds for TEA and RSTP exchange programs, as well as for small projects, is necessary to maximize the effectiveness of scarce transportation funds in rural areas.

Planning, Programming, and Monitoring (PPM) Funds

If we have learned anything from SB 45, it is that quality planning, programming, and monitoring of projects are essential to project delivery. That means having the staff or consultants with the expertise to wade through the myriad of federal requirements and Caltrans procedures associated with moving a project from concept to construction. This is where rural counties often find themselves at a disadvantage: obtaining and retaining personnel or consultants that have this expertise costs money. Planning, programming, and monitoring (PPM) funds provide those funds. However, the limitation for regions to programming no more than 2% of their Regional Choice funds for PPM creates a major problem for the smallest rural counties. If you're only receiving a few million in any given STIP round, 2% does not go far enough to cover the costs of adequate project PPM.

Efforts

The Task Force has been working closely with the Regional Council of Rural Counties to develop legislation that would increase the allowable amount allocated to PPM from 2% to 5%. This has now been included in AB 608 (Dickerson) in the 2001/02 legislative session.

Continuing Issues

- The Task Force will continue to work towards approval of legislation to allow regions to program PPM funds at levels adequate to assure project delivery.

Local Road Rehabilitation and Maintenance Funding

The State's smallest counties generally have proportionately higher miles of roadways with the fewest resources to maintain them. The CTC recognized this need when, in 1998, the Commission opened the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) to local road rehabilitation projects. Many of these projects were added, including those in rural areas, even though rehabilitation projects do not fit well with the intent or mechanics of the STIP. The Task Force acknowledges and appreciates the Commission's efforts to widen the description of rehabilitation project and work with rural counties to make these projects fit better into the STIP.

The funding picture brightened somewhat with the Governor's Traffic Congestion Relief Program (TCRP), with its one-time \$400 million distribution for maintenance and an estimated \$120 million for the next five years. Unfortunately, the city and county apportionments to rural areas from this total will meet less than 5% of the identified needs.

Efforts

The Task Force has continuously focused on reducing the \$1 billion backlog of rehab projects that would bring county roads up to "good" condition, as well as providing a dedicated funding source for the \$50 million needed annually to maintain those roads in good condition.

Continuing Issues

- Until the backlog is eliminated and a dedicated funding source is found, rural counties continue to need the option of using STIP funds for road rehabilitation.

New Project Funding Sources

Clearly, existing resources are not sufficient to make the capital improvements needed to provide effective transportation systems in rural areas. These transportation improvements are identified in the local Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs), which must provide a “financially realistic” project list. More and more counties find themselves unable to reconcile their project needs with their realistic funding expectations over the 20 year life of the plan.

Efforts

About half of the counties represented by the Task Force have expressed interest or have taken steps to pursue the approach taken by many urban areas: a local sales tax for transportation. While many rural counties could meet a 50% or 55% majority threshold, few - if any - could meet the currently required 2/3 majority.

Continuing Issues

- Rural counties join our urban counterparts to try to develop additional sources of funding for needed transportation projects.

Rural Planning Assistance (RPA) Funds

Previous efforts by the Rural Counties Task Force and Caltrans resulted in the doubling of Rural Planning Assistance funds within the Caltrans budget starting in FY 2000/01. The primary need and use for these additional funds is to improve the Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs) and transportation planning processes in rural counties.

Task Force members also wish to acknowledge Caltrans’ successful efforts to improve the speed at which agencies are reimbursed for RPA funds. In small agencies, cash flow is an issue, and Caltrans’ improved reimbursement has made a big difference.

Efforts

Prior to this additional funding, some rural county RTPs had not been updated in ten years. With the help of these planning funds, all rural counties will have current RTPs ready for the 2002 STIP.

Continuing Issues

- It is critical to the continued improvement to the rural planning processes that the increased level of Rural Planning Funds is continued.

Caltrans Local Assistance

The effects of SB 45 have included a significant increased demand on Caltrans Local Assistance. Rural counties in particular depend on the expertise of the Local Assistance program to guide us

through the maze of federal and state requirements. We appreciate Caltrans' response to this need, by increasing the staffing for Local Assistance and practicing more direct outreach to the local jurisdictions.

While the improvements to Local Assistance is important, these Caltrans staffers can only go so far. For example, they can help explain the new Federal DBE requirements or how to process a federal environmental document, but they cannot send staff to a small city or county to actually implement either. This is why the Task Force members still need additional PPM funds and state-only funding.

Efforts

Task Force members continue to work with their districts' Local Assistance program to facilitate better communications and information flow between Caltrans and project sponsors and improve project delivery.

Continuing Issues

- The Task Force strongly encourages Caltrans to continue the training and improved staffing levels for the Local Assistance program.

Interregional Transportation Improvement Program (ITIP)

As our members gear up to prepare our 2002 Regional Transportation Improvement Programs (RTIPs), so Caltrans is developing their 2002 ITIP. Under SB 45, 25% of the STIP is to be programmed into the ITIP, with primary focus outside of urban areas. This creates a particularly strong connection between RTIP and ITIP projects for rural areas, because so many of our members' largest transportation challenges are on the state highway system. At the same time, many of these projects have price tags that far outstrip the ability of the local agencies to fund them. That is where ITIP participation becomes so critical.

The Task Force is particularly enthused about the way Caltrans has addressed the 2002 ITIP. In the past, the timing of the ITIP project selection had made it difficult for local agencies to adequately coordinate their RTIP submittals for potential joint projects, since they weren't certain what was or was not included in the ITIP portion. In the 2002 round, Caltrans has been proactive in seeking RTIP/ITIP partnerships with local agencies. The process is much more transparent, and there has been a far higher level of communication between Caltrans and local agencies about the Department's priorities. Of particular value is the commitment of Jim Nicholas and his staff to provide an ITIP by late summer, which gives the local agencies time to craft and coordinate their RTIP submittals prior to the December due date.

Efforts

Task Force members have been working closely with Caltrans and their local project sponsors to develop partnerships for ITIP/RTIP projects that make the best use of state and local resources.

Continuing Issues

- The Task Force supports the continued efforts to make the ITIP process proactive, accessible, and coordinated with local project sponsors.

Commission Liaison to the Rural Counties

The transportation needs and issues of rural counties are unique, and those sensibilities need representation on the Commission. The Task Force is most appreciative of Commissioner Kirk Lindsey in his appointment to the CTC, acting as liaison to the Task Force, and providing an effective voice for these issues.

Efforts

Task Force members regularly communicate and coordinate with Mr. Lindsey to provide input on the rural perspective to the Commission activities.

Continuing Issues

- Another rural county representative to fill one of the two openings on the Commission would further help efforts to ensure communication and cooperation between the CTC, the Governor's administration, Caltrans, and the State's 28 rural counties.

State Level Committee Participation

In addition to those issues and efforts listed above, various Task Force members are also providing a rural perspective to the following efforts. Many of these efforts involve participation on committees established by Caltrans.

- Interregional Transportation Strategic Plan
- SB 45 Project Monitoring/Reporting Data Base
- Local Assistance "Enhanced Training and Outreach"
- SB 335 Senior Transportation Issues
- Caltrans, City, County, Federal Highway Administration Coordinating Group
- State Planning Guidelines Development Quality Assurance Team
- California Transportation Investment Strategy (CTIS)
- Universal Transportation Project Identifier (UTPI) Project
- Next TEA Federal Reauthorization
- FTA 5310, Welfare to Work Advisory Committee, Rural Transit Issues
- Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS)
- Streamlining Caltrans Local Assistance Procedures and Guidelines Manuals

Members of the Task Force also actively coordinate with other statewide groups to share information and perspective on transportation issues. These other groups include:

- Regional Transportation Planning Agency (RTPA) Group
- California Association of Councils of Government (CALCOG)
- Regional-Caltrans Coordinating Group
- Regional Council of Rural Counties (RCRC)